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ABSTRACT

The New York Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) is a grass-roots community organization representing 20,000 mostly low-income residents of New York City. This report presents evidence uncovered by ACORN of institutional racism in the New York City public schools that prevents parents of color from making informed decisions about their children's education. In nearly 100 test visits to schools in 16 community school districts, the ACORN Schools Office discovered that Black and Latino parents were permitted to speak with an educator less than half as often as White parents, and that White parents were given tours of the school two and a half times more often than Black or Latino parents. White parents appeared to receive better treatment, and access to information about gifted programs appeared to vary by the race of the person making the inquiry. Many times discrimination was evident only when the experiences of white and minority parents could be compared. ACORN is not concerned with why this discrimination exists, whether conscious or unconscious, but it is concerned with the ways in which it closes off options for students. The most blatant result of the narrowing of opportunity is seen at the city's premier academic high schools, Stuyvesant and Bronx Science. In a system where 39% of high school students are Black and 34% Latino, Stuyvesant has less than 5% Black and just over 4% Hispanic, and Bronx Science has less than 11% Black and about 9% Hispanic. Specific recommendations are made by ACORN to reverse the racist treatment of parents in the schools and to examine the city's policies toward gifted students. A large chart summarizes results of some tester visits. Tester instructions and the test report form are included. (SLD)

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ED 418 178

Secret Apartheid

A Report on Racial Discrimination Against Black and Latino Parents and Children In the New York City Public Schools

by the

New York ACORN Schools Office

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The ACORN Schools Office wishes to express its thanks to the many individuals and organizations who made this study possible. Foremost among these are the 42 people who visited New York City public elementary schools to gather the information analyzed in this report. These dedicated volunteers included ACORN members, allies in the school reform movement, professionals, non-profit executives and foundation officers, and unaffiliated parents who took time out of their busy schedules to visit schools across the city. Given the outrageous behavior many of them experienced, we can best express our gratitude by allowing them to remain anonymous.

We want to thank Phyllis Spiro and the staff of the Open Housing Center for their invaluable technical assistance in setting up our testing procedures.

Pumphouse Projects supplied analytical and editorial assistance in preparing this report. Pumphouse Director John M. Beam provided both expertise and creativity to our efforts to summarize the complex experiences represented by the more than 100 pre-tests and visits that provide the basis of our study.

SUMMARY

One of the most pressing issues confronting New Yorkers is the quality of the public education which a million children and youths experience. New York ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, is a grass roots community organization representing 20,000 mostly low income New Yorkers. For over ten years, ACORN members have fought for better schools for their children and neighborhoods. Despite many hard won ACORN victories at the local level, hundreds of thousands of young people continue to attend substandard schools that fail to address their educational needs. In many cases, these schools shut their parents and the community out of any meaningful involvement in efforts to provide more effective educational opportunities for them.

This report, *Secret Apartheid*, details evidence of institutional racism in New York City Public Schools which prevents parents of color from making informed decisions about their children's education. In nearly 100 test visits to schools in 16 community school districts, the ACORN Schools Office discovered that:

- *Black* and *latin* parents were permitted to speak with an educator *less* than half as often as white parents.
- *White* parents were given tours of schools two and a half times *more* often than black or latin parents.
- White parents often received "A" list treatment while people of color were relegated to the "B" list.
- Access to information about gifted programs appeared to vary by the race of the parent making the inquiry.

Examples of discrimination range from the blatant to the less obvious. Many times this discrimination becomes apparent only when the treatment of black and white testers is compared:

- Ten days *after* an assistant principal told a black parent there would be no room in the school's kindergarten for her child because the classes were already filled to capacity, the a.p. told a white parent that she should register soon because classes would be filling up.

- A latina tester was quizzed by school secretaries about whether she was on public assistance and whether her child spoke English.

- A white parent was encouraged to apply for a gifted program even though she had missed the deadline; she was given the number of someone in the district office to ask "what she could do." A black tester at the same school was told to come back in a month for kindergarten registration and was offered no information about the gifted program.

We are not concerned with whether this institutional racism reflects conscious decisions by policy makers; malign neglect by elected officials; or the dysfunction that results when a vital public responsibility is managed by people whose racial, class, and cultural reality is totally different from that of the people whom they are supposed to serve. We *are* concerned with the ways in which, by denying parents access to essential information about the schools and their programs, it closes off options for students and de facto sets them on the track to academic mediocrity if not outright failure.

The most blatant illustration of the long term results of narrowing our children's options can be found in the composition of the student body at New York City's premier academic high schools: Stuyvesant and Bronx Science.

System-wide, about 39 percent of high school students are black, 34 percent latino. At Stuyvesant, less than five percent of students are black and just over four percent are hispanic. At Bronx Science, less than 11 percent are black; about 9 percent are latino.

The public school programs which effectively prepare students to enter one of these elite schools are limited. What our study will demonstrate is that in a variety of ways parents of color, who are the vast majority of parents in the public schools, do not have equal access to information about regular schools, let alone about the gifted programs, option schools, and other "fast track" alternatives used to market the public schools to white middle class parents. Without information, choice is a myth for parents and options non-existent for their children. Without information, reform of the New York City Public Schools is an impossibility.

This study recommends that the Chancellor and the Board of Education take a number of specific steps to reverse the racist treatment of parents in the schools. We further call for an immediate systematic examination of the currently uncharted array of gifted programs: What is their purpose? Whom do they serve? How are they evaluated? Are they appropriate for

children in the early grades? And, perhaps most important, why are the innovative approaches used in gifted programs not used in all of our schools?

CONTEXT

New York ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, is a grass roots community organization representing 20,000 mostly low income New Yorkers. ACORN members organize neighborhood organizations and tenants unions to take action on issues that are of vital concern to their families, their neighbors, and their communities. One of the most pressing issues confronting New Yorkers is the quality of the public education offered to a million children and youth in our city.

In the past ten years, ACORN members have worked steadily to broaden the base of active parents committed to systemic reform of the public schools. We have worked to make schools safer by pressing school authorities and other local officials to deal with asbestos problems, make needed repairs, and clean up hazardous conditions near our schools. We have trained parents in the mysteries of proportional voting and how to run for community school board and seen victories by those parents in a number of districts in Brooklyn and Queens. ACORN members mounted the pressure that forced District 22 to establish PS 245 as an alternative to busing our children from a "frozen zone"[1] to schools miles away and were intimately involved in the design, planning, and staffing of that school. ACORN members in Far Rockaway lobbied successfully for a new mini-school that was set up within PS 183 and successfully defended it against budget chicanery by school board members who coveted the resources for whiter, more middle class programs. ACORN parents are involved in restructuring efforts in several schools in other districts in Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan. Next September, a community designed high school, the ACORN Community High School, will open in Crown Heights.

While we are proud of these hard won victories, the fact remains that hundreds of thousands of young people continue to attend substandard schools that fail to address their educational needs and shut their parents and the community out of any meaningful participation

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[1] The frozen zone was carved out of the catchment area for PS 139 when that school was deemed by District 22 officials to be overcrowded. Children, mostly people of color, who lived in the frozen zone, could not attend PS 139 but were not zoned for the catchment areas for other neighborhood schools. The result was that they were bused across the district to other schools.

in efforts to plan more effective educational programs. The need for this study was driven home by two very different events.

The first was the March 17, 1995 release of the racial break down of the enrollment at the crown jewels of the New York City Public Schools system: Stuyvesant and Bronx Science. These schools, which require middle school students to score well on a competitive exam, admit black and latino students in proportions drastically out of synch with their numbers in the high school system as a whole.[2]

INSTITUTION / RACE	Bronx Science	Stuyvesant	NYC Public High Schools
White	40%	41%	17%
Black	10.7%	4.8%	39%
Latino	9.2%	4.3%	34%
Asian	40.1%	49.9%	10%

The question is not whether the entrance exam is unfair. The question is why students who attend public elementary and middle schools for eight or nine years are so unprepared to do well when they take it? What is happening (or *not* happening) in our schools that so few of our students can take advantage of the wonderful opportunities that these schools represent? How have public schools become isolated from the public scrutiny and involvement that would support real improvements and real accountability? As we will see below, part of the answer lies in a systemic exclusion of parents of color, who make up the majority of parents in the public schools, from even minimal information about schools for their children.

Each step of the way to Stuyvesant or Bronx Science is marked by choices that parents make with their children. The tracks that lead the other direction -- to the zoned high school where up to a quarter of the faculty is teaching out of license, to the so-called bilingual

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[2] Data for the table immediately following this paragraph are from a March 16, 1995 memorandum to the Board of Education from then Chancellor Ramon C. Cortines, Re: Program to Increase Diversity in Specialized Science High Schools.

programs, to special education classes located in the school basement -- are more often governed by choices someone else makes about, not for, our children.

Even the language used to describe the alleged choices in our public schools has different meanings when applied to options for white children than when it is used for their black and latino peers. A gifted program in Carnarsie means children with IQs of 130 and over. The "gifted program" at a elementary school attended by one ACORN member's daughter left her totally unprepared to handle normal middle school work.

High school "choice" has existed since the early seventies and in its current form since the mid-eighties. Although the Division of High Schools has a number of good academic, option, and alternative schools, there are many more students who would like to enroll in them than they can serve. Middle and junior high school students submit applications listing up to five high schools in hopes of being admitted to at least one of them. So, choice is actually competition.

For non-white intermediate school students and their parents, the process of trying to get into somewhere besides their zoned high school, which may be of dubious quality or questionable safety, is often confusing and futile. It may also be a time when the limitations of a child's elementary and middle school education becomes painfully obvious.

- At IS 166 in Community School District (CSD) 19, an eighth grader has been doing well in the school's "accelerated program." She lists five academically mid-range schools on her choice application. She is rejected by all five and will have to attend Thomas Jefferson, her zoned school.

High school applications must be submitted in November at the very beginning of a student's last year in middle or junior high school. In the flurry of beginning of the year activities and other paperwork, the applications are often not given the high priority they should have.

- At JHS 8 (CSD 28), there is no follow-up on the application notice or counseling process to discuss selection with students. Students who fail to submit a choice application are automatically assigned to the zoned high school with no further discussion.

Even parents who make a conscientious effort can still be caught in the fine print.

- A mother with a child in an intermediate school in District 17 attends a parents counseling session which is supposed to help her sort out the options in the Board of Education's catalog of high schools. She focuses on the good grades her daughter has always brought home and helps her apply to five academically oriented high schools. No one at the school has ever bothered to explain to her that her daughter scores in the bottom quartile on standardized tests. The daughter ends up at the zoned high school.

Even when students do receive some sort of counseling, it may be considerably less than helpful.

- In IS 143 (CSD 6), a student is told bluntly that because of her academic performance she has *no* options other than George Washington High School, an overcrowded SURR school that exists under constant threat of state takeover. No one at her school addressed the question of how she could be permitted to graduate if her grades are so abysmal.

The second impetus for this study was much more specific. Two parents in an ACORN neighborhood, one white and one black, visited PS 217 (CSD 22) to inquire about registering their children for kindergarten. They arrived at the school at the same time. The white parent was seen immediately, had all his questions answered, and was shown classrooms in the gifted program because school staff automatically assumed his son would be enrolled in that program. The black mother was kept waiting for 45 minutes, only shown regular classes, and provided with little information.

In sum, we see parents trying to locate a good kindergarten for their children and having incredible difficulty in obtaining information to which they are legally entitled. We see children of color in gifted programs that are a sham while white children have access to programs that ultimately lead to Stuyvesant. We see the rest of intermediate school students foundering in a choice system that still sends most of them to local, overcrowded, poorly supported zoned high schools.

Although there are many causes for the failure of our schools, ACORN members believe that there is a direct link between the failure represented by the enrollment in the system's elite schools and the treatment received by the mother at PS 217. This study summarizes our systematic investigation into whether or not concerned latino and black parents are shut out of the New York City Public Schools. Sadly, the results strongly suggest that they are.

METHODOLOGY

After the initial incident described above, the ACORN Schools Office pre-tested three other schools on a trial basis to identify some of the issues facing parents who try to investigate schools for their children.

- At PS 225 (CSD 27), the black tester was told that she had to have her child with her. She was unable to find out anything substantive about the gifted program. She was made to feel unwelcome. The white tester, who also did not bring her child, was told about the school's educational approach, introduced to a kindergarten teacher, and shown a few classrooms. When she asked about gifted programming, she was directed to two other schools which house the district's Astor Program.

- At PS 249 (CSD 17), the white secretary attempted to intimidate the black tester by accusing her of registering the child late, quizzed her on the child's citizenship, and told the tester, a native of the United States, she would have to bring a passport with the other documentation for registration. A secretary told the white tester that there were no white children in the school and that she should go to PS 139, which has a gifted program; she insisted that PS 249 was not very good.

- At PS 92 (CSD 17), the black tester received confused answers to her questions about gifted programming and was directed to a nearby middle school which was clearly inappropriate for her prospective kindergarten student. The white tester was told by the secretary that the school had recently been on SURR status (School Under Registration Review) and was not strong academically. She suggested that she talk to her neighbors because the white parents send their children to a school in the Brooklyn Heights area.

Based on these trial tests, the ACORN Schools Office proceeded to organize a more extensive and systematic examination of the access parents have to New York City Public Schools. In setting up our visits to the schools, we borrowed heavily from the model used by the Open Housing Center to test for discrimination in housing access.

Testers visited a non-random selection of 28 schools in 16 of the city's 32 community school districts. Visits were made in the boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. Factors informing the selection included higher than average levels of diversity in student bodies, anecdotal reports about a school's handling of parent inquiries, a concentration of gifted programs, utilization, performance indicators, Chapter I status, and proximity to ACORN neighborhoods.

Each tester was provided with general instructions for their test visit, a structured reporting questionnaire, and an open ended narrative form to summarize the sequence of each visit. (Sample materials are included in the appendix.) In all but one case, testers arrived at schools unannounced. They then sought information about the school and the procedures for registering their (sometimes hypothetical) pre-school child for kindergarten. If asked for an address, they provided an address in or near the catchment area for the school or said that they were considering moving into the community.

Specifically, in their role as parents, testers were seeking information about the school's educational philosophy; the organization of its programs; and the operation of its kindergarten classes. Testers were instructed to move as far up the school hierarchy as possible and to attempt to visit classes.

Of the 99 visits made, 50 were made by white testers and 49 by testers who were people of color, most often African American. After their visits, testers recorded their observations concerning the position of the person or persons with whom they spoke (secretary, principal, etc.), what questions school personnel asked the testers, how well school personnel answered testers' questions, whether or not testers were permitted to see classes, and how testers were treated.

The questionnaires and narratives were then subjected to a content analysis in which we tabulated:

- the position of the most senior person who interacted with each tester in a substantive manner,
- whether or not a tester was shown any classes,
- whether a tester was asked where he or she lived, and
- whether school personnel mentioned gifted programs without being prompted.

A second round of analysis evaluated each tester's report for indicators of the emotional content of the interaction with the school staff (friendly, informative, unwelcoming, etc.).

A table providing an overview of visits, testers, and districts and schools visited is included in the appendix. Quotations throughout this study are drawn from the reporting forms

and field notes of volunteers who visited the schools. The following table summarizes key data which inform the findings section.

KEY VARIABLES BY RACE			
Variable	**Total**	**White**	**People of Color**
Testers	42	21	21
Visits[3]	99	50	49
Spoke with educator	37	23	14
Percent visits with educators	37%	46%	28%
Tours	25	18	7
Percent tours	25%	36%	14%
Tour when met educator	23	17	6
No tour when met educator	20	6	8
Asked for address	53	25	28
Security guard blocked access	7	3	4
School staff brought up gifted program	20	12	8

[3] The visit by race of tester is the basic unit of comparison in the text.

FINDINGS

From our investigation and analysis, we have distilled seven findings. Four of them document differential treatment by school personnel of people of color and white people. On a number of levels, the inquiries of black testers were much less successful than those of white testers:

- **Black testers gained access to educators only half as often as white testers did.**[4] Principals and assistant principals were less available to black testers than to white ones. Office staff and security staff who claimed to be able to answer questions about the school were usually *not* able to discuss anything substantive such as the educational philosophy of the school or approaches to classroom organization.

While not every visit which included a conversation with an educator also included a tour, in fact, most of the tours were provided by educators. This leads to a not surprising corollary:

- **White testers were given some sort of school tour two and half times more often than black testers.**

Black testers had markedly less access than white testers to expert information about the school and to opportunities to observe a school's educational approach in action.

- **Although many school people dealt professionally, if not always warmly, with both white and black testers, disturbing examples of two-tiered treatment were uncovered.**

At PS 14 (CSD 8), two white testers were given tours and two others were given the opportunity to make appointments for tours. None of the black testers were given tours or an opportunity to make an appointment.

A black security guard at PS 14 told a black tester that she "need not worry about space" and that a child had "just enrolled yesterday." The assistant principal then told that tester that, even if she were zoned for the school, she would not be able to register because the school was

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[4] Calculations dealing with issues of access are based on visits, not individuals.

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filled beyond capacity. *A week and half later*, a white tester was "encouraged to register as soon as possible" because openings were limited; the assistant principal "offered (the tester) her business card to call her" for registration dates.[5]

White testers at PS 14 received complete information and staff took initiative to follow-up on unresolved issues ("warm, enthusiastic, dedicated"). Black testers found that staff was "very reluctant to give me any information," that "the atmosphere (was) very unpleasant and the information was not given pleasantly." Another black tester could not get past the security guard.

At PS 116 (CSD 2), the request of the white tester to see some classes "was granted graciously." The black tester, who was not shown any classes, was told that classrooms were usually viewed in group tours. At another CSD 2 school, PS 11, an office worker insisted that a black tester could not possibly live at the address she presented (London Terrace), implying that it was not a "black" address; the tester was then given no information about the school or its gifted program. A subsequent white tester had no problem presenting a London Terrace address.

At PS 153 (CSD 11), a latina tester was asked if she was on welfare and if her child spoke English.

At PS 71, a white tester was invited into the office of a guidance counselor who told him that "property values in the neighborhood were not stable," and that

> "the neighborhood used to be 'hard working-class' people who 'if they can get out, are getting out now.'...He reported that 'the non-English-speaking immigrants (Hispanics, Koreans, Arabs, Eastern Europeans) were also coming into the neighborhood and that he was experiencing that students coming into the school were 'needier' than in previous years."

The guidance counselor went on to say that reading scores at PS 71 had been slipping for the past five years. He repeatedly urged the tester to check out PS 14 because of "its smaller size...more innovative programs and stronger attention paid to students...He seemed pessimistic

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[5] The white tester was also told that, because the state does not mandate kindergarten, the "school was under no obligation to burden themselves with overcrowded classes or too many classes." While it is true that the *state* does not mandate kindergarten, the NYC Board of Education does.

about the direction PS 71 was going...overcrowding, budget cuts and 'needier and needier students." The counselor encouraged the tester to call him if he needed help in registering his child at 71 *or* 14. We note that this tester was urged to go to PS 14 a *full* month after the black tester mentioned above was told that the kindergarten was filled to capacity.

- **Although supplementary data and case studies should be collected, access to information about gifted programs -- and, therefore, access to the programs themselves -- appears to vary with the race of the tester.**

School staff broached the topic of gifted programs somewhat more with white testers than with black testers.[6] The real difference lay in the variation in the way in which gifted programs were discussed with parents. On a school by school basis, the differences in how the topic was handled ranged from subtle to outrageous.

At PS 212 (CSD 21), a white tester began hearing about the SIGMA program beginning with the guard at the door. "They (office staff and assistant principal) suggested trying for SIGMA even though I had missed the deadline." She was told that she might need to secure private testing but given a phone number of the appropriate district staff person to ask "what she could do."

The black tester who also inquired about kindergarten for her child was told to come back in a month and to bring the appropriate documents. She was shown some classrooms, empty because the children were at gym. There was no discussion of special programs or testing.

At PS 116 (CSD 2), the principal displayed surprise that the white tester was inquiring about the regular program, explained the gifted program and, despite the fact that the program has a waiting list, provided an application form and told her she could have her child tested at a number of locations. The white tester was even given listings of private school bus services that provide transportation to the school from the Upper East Side as well as from the Upper West Side -- which is not part of District 2. The black tester at PS 116 was also treated cordially but had to inquire about the gifted program and was told by the office person that

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[6] School staff brought up gifted programs unprompted in 24 percent of visits by white testers (12/50) and 16 percent of visits by black testers (8/49).

registration did not guarantee acceptance into the program. At PS 11 (CSD 2), the white tester was even provided with a list of private testing services whom she could call.

At PS 114 (CSD 18), a white tester was told that she could have her child tested privately for the gifted program.

When a white tester asked for general information at PS 153 (CSD 11), she was immediately referred to the gifted coordinator. Not only was her black counterpart, who presented herself as a grandmother, told nothing about gifted programs, she was interrogated about her guardian status and told to bring in adoption papers.

In a related if obverse incident, a special education supervisor at PS 71 (CSD 8), who knew nothing about the tester other than that she was white, told her that she, the special education supervisor, was not the appropriate person with whom to speak because the tester's child would not be in special ed.

In the few cases for which testers were able to make observations, the enrollment of gifted programs appeared to be disproportionately white.

Based on class pictures the white tester saw during her tour of PS 212, the tester observed that the SIGMA classes served mostly white children and other classrooms were mostly black children.

At PS 116, the gifted kindergarten class, which was studying Georgia O'Keefe, had three children of color in a class of 20 or 25. According to the tester, "I had to look hard to discern this. I didn't see anyone with very dark skin." The ratio of color in the regular kindergarten classes she saw was reversed.

The other three of our seven findings relate to other dimensions of treatment experienced to some extent by all testers. However, since most public school parents are black or latino, these behaviors will have disproportionate impact on people of color:

- **Security guards block access to information about schools.**

In at least seven instances, testers were unable to get past security guards to speak with school personnel knowledgeable about the school. In others, only dedicated persistence won

access to other school personnel. In some cases, security guards had been given (or taken upon themselves) the task of providing information (sometimes incorrect) concerning registration and the school.

For instance, the chief of security at PS 31 (CSD 14) insisted on answering a tester's questions, but when she could not provide requested information used the excuse that she was only a security guard; the tester noted that the guard "was very abrupt and...seemed not to have any patience with my questions." This interaction provided the sum total of this tester's experience with this school.

At PS 346, a tester reported that, "Clearly, her (the security guard's) instructions were to tell people to come back in late April." At PS 144 (CSD 28), the guard insisted that a visitor had to show him a copy of her electric bill before she could have a pass to the office. (He eventually backed off his demand.)

At PS 217 (CSD 22), a tester was told by the security guard that he could not "speak to someone about registering my child...because my child was not with me." Even when pressed, she continued to insist that he would not be admitted to the school until his child "accompanied" him. The guard then refused to give her name.

- **Parents who visit, or attempt to visit, public schools to obtain information about those schools are too often treated abruptly, rudely, and unprofessionally.**

Testers report repeated incidents in which school staff refused to provide their names, kept the testers standing while speaking to them from desks on the other side of an office, and failed to provide appropriate materials related to registration and school programs. At PS 272 (CSD 18), the tester's first encounters a security guard who, "hands me the pen to sign with one hand and continues to eat with the other..."

Differences in how visiting parents are treated often appear to be frighteningly random. At PS 196 (CSD 28), for instance, both black and white testers described their interactions with various school personnel in terms that seem to describe completely different places. One report mentions frequent smiles. Another refers to a school aide as "rude." Another tester found the pupil attendance secretary "very professional." Yet another was required by office staff to produce two forms of identification before they would even speak with her.

At PS 207 (CSD 27), the tester found the secretary "unfriendly, abrupt, unwelcoming...barely helpful." But when that tester was able to connect with the guidance office, she encountered a "very friendly and helpful" counselor who, in turn, found a receptive kindergarten teacher to answer her questions.

In several schools, staff told testers that tours were not permitted. Although not atypical, PS 115 (CSD 18) staff was perhaps among the more blunt. One tester was informed that, "We don't allow it...too disruptive." Another tester was told that "hundreds of parents" would come in if the school permitted tours.

- **Roughly half of the testers were questioned, some of them quite closely, about their residence (54 of 99 visits). Testers were often denied information about the school if they did not provide an address in the school's catchment area.**

At PS 95 which is located in the predominantly white end of CSD 10, the black tester was told, incorrectly, that her address was in District 9, which serves mostly black neighborhoods. At PS 153 (CSD 11), a tester who gave an address that is in the immediately adjacent Coop City was challenged on her residency; the two references checked by the office staff provided conflicting information. At PS 72 (CSD 8), a tester was told that his address was not in the catchment area and he, therefore, "would not be able to register there...She didn't volunteer to be of any more help, just left me hanging, so I left."

Board of Education policy allows parents to enroll their children in schools outside of their catchment area or outside of the community school district in which they reside. The purpose of this policy is to provide an increased level of educational options for parents and students and to accommodate special family situations. Parents must petition for a variance from the superintendent of the community school district in which they wish to enroll their children. (Relevant sections of Chancellor's Regulation A-181 are included in the Appendix.)

Clearly, a parent's decision to seek a variance should be based on an informed opinion about whether the school will serve her or his child's educational and developmental needs. In school after school, school staff focused on residency to the exclusion of other topics. To refuse a parent information because a school staff person makes a judgement on the residency of the inquirer makes a mockery of choice within the New York City Public Schools; in essence, we

found security guards and office aides assuming the prerogatives of the Chancellor and their local superintendent.

In almost no cases did school staff even mention variances.

CONCLUSIONS

- Racial steering that limits the options available to students of color begins very early in their educational careers -- as early, in fact, as kindergarten.

- By design, poor management, or institutional insensitivity, on average, schools place more obstacles in the path of black and latino parents attempting to obtain information about public schools which they can use to plan their children's education.

- Gifted programs merit additional scrutiny to determine whether formal and informal admission policies are slanted in ways that limit applications and participation by the typical New York City public school student, who is most often a person of color.

- School office staff are assuming responsibilities for screening and eligibility decisions that are beyond their professional capability and legal authorization.

- School office staff often treat the public in ways that are inconsistent with appropriate behavior for public employees.

- Security guards are being used for educational and informational functions which are beyond their professional capabilities. Moreover, this practice sends a disturbing and insulting message to parents, particularly low income parents of color.

- School personnel, from security guards to principals, routinely violate both the letter and the spirit of Chancellor's Regulation A-181[7], which governs school choice and the procedures for securing a variance to permit a child to attend a school different than the one for which he or she is zoned. (See appendix for a longer discussion and excerpts from the policy.)

- Board of Education policy governing parents rights and responsibilities is routinely violated by public school employees.

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[7] Chancellor's Regulation A-181: Inter District Parental Transfers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of this study are based on a series of tightly linked assumptions:

- Parents have a right to be involved in decisions concerning their children's education.
- There can be no meaningful involvement without adequate information about the programs, philosophy, budget, and operations of the schools our children attend.
- Institutional racism curtails the amount and quality of information made available to parents of color compared to what is provided for white parents.
- Therefore, parents of color are placed at a serious disadvantage in advocating for the best educational situation for their children.
- One serious consequence of this inequity is the formal and informal tracking of students in ways that do not serve their educational needs.

Our overarching recommendation is that the New York City Board of Education put its will behind its rhetoric. According to Board policy, "schools have the responsibility to provide parents with access to available information on educational programs and opportunities..." and,

- "to be accorded all rights without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability or economic status," and to
- "be given access to current information regarding services which are provided by the school system, eligibility requirements for these services, and how to apply for them..."[8]

But, as this study clearly demonstrates, the rights of parents in the schools are not accorded without regard to race or color. They do not have access to the information they need. The result, inevitably, will be that the children of most parents will not be admitted to the programs that might set them on the path to a Stuyvesant or Bronx Science, that explicit and covert tracking will continue. Our recommendations begin, therefore, with the programs that symbolize the options most of our children are being denied.

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[8] New York City Board of Education, *Policy Statement: Bill of Parent's Rights and Responsibilities*, resolution adopted June 23, 1993. Additional excerpts can be found in the appendix.

Evaluate the equity, operation, and appropriateness of gifted programs.

The finding that schools are less open with information about gifted programs when speaking with parents of color raises a number disturbing issues. We call on the Chancellor to explicitly acknowledge his responsibility for monitoring improvements in gifted and other choice programs. Specifically, we urge him to take a number of steps which will contribute to improved accountability of gifted programs in the New York City Public Schools.

- Until the Board of Education can certify that gifted and talented programs throughout the city are not substantially segregated and that they are open to any children who can meet reasonable admission policies, we call for an immediate moratorium on all so-called gifted programming for grades K through 3.

- To address the difficulty black and latino parents have in obtaining information about schools their children might attend, the Board of Education should contract with a community based organization to operate a "Choice Clearinghouse" where information about all New York City schools and programs will be centralized and available in a user-friendly format to interested parents.

- During the spring 1996 semester, the central board should undertake and publish the results of a census of gifted programs. The final report should include:

    - the location (by district and school) of each gifted program,
    - the admittance standards (qualifications and process) for each gifted program,
    - a breakout of the race of each program's students,
    - the source of testing (private or district), and
    - the catchment area and district of residence for each student in each gifted program.

- The Chancellor should immediately begin an evaluation of gifted programs, including their admission process; admission standards; procedures and standards for testing; their content and approach; and their comparability across schools and districts. Such an evaluation should address:

    - the question of what so-called gifted programs do differently than regular schools,
    - the question of why approaches that are effected in gifted programs cannot be extended to all students, and specifically,
    - the appropriateness of tracking children at the k-3 level.

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- The Chancellor should immediately direct community school district superintendents to publicize information on their district's gifted programs including:

    - names of schools with gifted or other selective option programs;
    - the calendar for testing, applications, registration, and admissions for such programs;
    - the criteria for selection for such programs;
    - a description of a public process for selecting students if applications exceed space.
    - In addition, superintendents should be directed to organize well publicized public meetings to inform parents, students, and the general public about special programs in the districts.

End racist treatment of parents.

We know that racist attitudes die hard. What must stop immediately is the racist behavior which prevents parents from finding out what they need to know to defend their children's education.

- Information about any public school program should be accessible to the public without regard to the race, nationality, or income of the person seeking the information. Admission requirements for all public school programs must be race neutral.

- Each school should be required to post in its entrance area a statement of the Chancellor-approved anti-discrimination policy. The posting should include numbers and contacts at the local community school district and central board to be called if people feel they have been ill treated because of their race, ethnicity, or economic status.

- The school system should have standard and publicly understood discipline procedures for school staff who behave abusively or unprofessionally to the public.

- There must be an immediate end to security guards blocking or screening access to school staff.

- While they still exist within the school system, information about entry requirements for special programs such as gifted and talented programs and option schools must be available to *all* students and their parents. Entry requirements must be administered in a manner that is both formally and informally race neutral.

Aggressively promote parent inquiries and involvement.

White parents investigating schools for their children consider class room visits, school tours, and in-depth conversations with principals essential to selecting a school for their children. Each fall, many schools in communities like Greenwich Village, Park Slope, or the Upper West Side accommodate their visits with regularly scheduled tours and highly accessible school staff. Generally, the address and catchment area of these parents is seldom an issue.

Tragically, many other parents -- particularly low income parents of color -- have become so alienated from their children's schools that they do not feel they have any right to such treatment, let alone to supervise their children's education. School officials must actively dispel the impression that many parents have rightfully developed that they are not welcomed in the public schools and that they have no role in their children's schooling. Ideally, schools should cultivate an atmosphere in which parents understand themselves to be part of the educational community in an ongoing, informal way. Unfortunately, the treatment parents receive in many schools strongly suggests the need for more formal structures as well as concrete changes in how schools deal with parents.

- Schools should have standardized procedures for arranging class visits and meetings with educators knowledgeable about the educational program and philosophy of each school. Such procedures should be well publicized and sufficiently flexible to recognize the constraints working parents face in terms of schedule and child care arrangements.

- There must be an immediate end to address-based screening of inquiries about individual schools.

- There must be an immediate end to security guards and office personnel making decisions requiring professional educational competence.

Level the playing field on the high school choice process.

Any informal survey of a cross section of parents of color will suggest that the way the high school selection process is administered can vary wildly from district to district and intermediate school to intermediate school. Combine this variation with the wide range of quality in so-called special programs which sometimes lull parents and students into a false sense of

security that they are progressing academically and getting into a good public high school begins to be a highly random event. The idea of choice when applied to school selection is not supposed to be the game of educational roulette it has been allowed to become.

- Counseling of middle school students and their parents on high school selection must be standardized and universal.

- Social service agencies or community based organizations should be contracted to provide the counseling function of the choice process which the intermediate schools have demonstrated an inability to provide in an accessible, equitable manner.

APPENDIX

NOTES ON THE RIGHTS OF OUT-OF-ZONE PARENTS

[The repeated unwillingness of school personnel to discuss "their" schools with parents whose addresses are outside of that school's catchment area flies in the face of highly detailed Chancellor's guidelines on inter-district transfers. Some districts also have choice plans that permit those who *do* reside within the district to select from among several schools. The following excerpts are drawn from Chancellor's Regulation A-181.]

"Regulation of the Chancellor"
Number: A-181 Issued: 2/12/93
Subject: Inter-District Parent Choice Transfers

According to the Abstract of the regulation:

> The enhanced ability of students to transfer to another district will: promote parents involvement; *provide greater school choice*; and, help ensure that students have access to more appropriate programs and *are served in well-chosen settings*. (*Emphasis* added.) (p. 1)

According to the Introduction:

> While innovation within districts is strongly encouraged, this Regulations provides an orderly process for transfers between districts *to meet the needs of parents and students*. Transfers may meet educational, medical, safety or guidance needs, or other special circumstances including those of working parents. (*Emphasis* added.) (p. 1)

Key elements of Regulation A-181 include:

"A parent may request a transfer to any school in any other community school district..." (p. 2)

"Parents should follow district guidelines with respect to visiting schools prior to making decisions about transfers *in order to better acquaint themselves with school programs* and travel requirements."[9] (*Emphasis* added.) (p. 2)

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[9] This clause also clearly implies that districts need to *have* a policy on school visits and that the policy be accessible to *all* parents interested in visiting schools.

"Districts with intra-district choice programs must accommodate transfer requests of their own students first...before considering requests of out-of-district students." (p. 3)

"Where there are not admission criteria for a school or program and there are more applicants than space available, fair and objective admission methods must be used (e.g., random lottery." (p. 3)

"[Admission] criteria may not discriminate against children with disabilities or on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender or special need such as those of bilingual or ESL students." (p. 3)

"Approval by *the receiving superintendent* is required..."[10] (*Emphasis* added.) (p. 4)

[10] I.e., not the school secretary, the office aide, or the security guard.

NOTES FROM THE BILL OF PARENTS' RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

[The following are additional relevant sections of the Board of Education *Policy Statement: Bill of Parents' Rights and Responsibilities* (adopted June 23, 1993).]

Parents have the right to:

"be treated with courtesy and respect by all school personnel..." (III. 1.)

"visit their child's school to meet with his or her child's teacher and principal at mutually agreeable times..."(III. 3.)

"be given access to information concerning their child's instructional program..." (II. 4.)

"be encouraged and assisted to participate effectively in governance and educational decision making..." (III. 7.)

SUMMARY OF TEST VISITS BY DISTRICT AND SCHOOL								
CSD	SCHOOL	ADDRESS REQUESTED	RACE: B/L	RACE: W	HIGHEST AUTHORITY MET	TOUR PROVIDED	TOUR OFFERED	GIFTED PROG. RAISED BY STAFF?
2	11	A	1		secretary	No		No
2	11	A		1	secretaries	No		Yes
2	116		1		principal	No		No
2	116	A		1	principal	Yes		Yes
3	9	A	1		adm. aide	No		Yes
3	163	A	1		ofc. wrkr.	No		No
3	163			1	ofc. staff	No		Yes
6	187		1		secretary	No		No
6	187			1	k. teacher	Yes		Yes
8	199			1	scl. aide	Yes		No
8	14	A	1		principal	No		No
8	14	A		1	asst. prin.	Yes		No
8	14	A		1	principal	No		No
8	14		1		ofc. wrkr.?	No		Yes
8	14			1	asst. prin.	Yes		Yes

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SUMMARY OF TEST VISITS BY DISTRICT AND SCHOOL								
CSD	SCHOOL	ADDRESS REQUESTED	RACE: B/L	RACE: W	HIGHEST AUTHORITY MET	TOUR PROVIDED	TOUR OFFERED	GIFTED PROG. RAISED BY STAFF?
8	14	A	1		asst. prin.	No		No
8	14		1		sec. guard	No		No
8	14	A		1	principal	No	Yes	No
8	71			1	asst. prin.	No		No
8	71			1	principal	Yes	Yes	No
8	71			1	principal	Yes	?	Yes
8	71	A	1		principal	Yes		No
8	71			1	sec. guard	No		No
8	71	A		1	sp ed sup	No		Yes
8	71		1		ofc. wrkr.	No		No
8	71		1		pupil adm.	No		No
8	71	A	1		prin? a.p.?	No		No
8	72		1		secretary	No		No
8	72		1		secretary	No		No
8	72		1		asst. prin.	No		No

SUMMARY OF TEST VISITS BY DISTRICT AND SCHOOL								
CSD	SCHOOL	ADDRESS REQUESTED	RACE: B/L	RACE: W	HIGHEST AUTHORITY MET	TOUR PROVIDED	TOUR OFFERED	GIFTED PROG. RAISED BY STAFF?
8	72	A		1	principal	Yes		No
8	72	A		1	principal	Yes		No
8	72	A		1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
8	72		1		principal	Yes		Yes
8	119	A		1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
10	95	A	1		secretaries	No		No
10	95			1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
11	153		1		secretary	No		No
11	153			1	principal	Yes		No
11	153	A	1		secretaries	No		No
13	8			1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
13	8	A	1		secretary	No		No
14	31	A	1		sec. guard	No		No
14	31	A		1	secretary	No		No
14	34	A		1	sec. guard	No		Yes

SUMMARY OF TEST VISITS BY DISTRICT AND SCHOOL								
CSD	SCHOOL	ADDRESS REQUESTED	RACE: B/L	RACE: W	HIGHEST AUTHORITY MET	TOUR PROVIDED	TOUR OFFERED	GIFTED PROG. RAISED BY STAFF?
14	34	A	1		sec. guard	No		No
15	154	A		1	principal	Yes		No
15	154	A	1		principal	Yes	Yes	No
15	230	A		1	principal	No		No
18	114	A	1		ofc. wrkr.	No		No
18	114	A	1		secretary	No		No
18	114			1	principal	Yes		No
18	114	A	1		ofc. wrkr.?	No		No
18	114	A		1	secretary	No		Yes
18	114			1	secretary	No		No
18	114		1		secretary	No		No
18	114			1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
18	115			1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
18	115	A	1		secretary	No		No
18	115	A		1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No

SUMMARY OF TEST VISITS BY DISTRICT AND SCHOOL								
CSD	SCHOOL	ADDRESS REQUESTED	RACE: B/L	RACE: W	HIGHEST AUTHORITY MET	TOUR PROVIDED	TOUR OFFERED	GIFTED PROG. RAISED BY STAFF?
18	115			1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
18	115		1		ofc. wrkr.	No		No
18	115	A	1		secretary	No		No
18	115	A		1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
18	272			1	asst. prin.	Yes	Yes	No
18	272	A	1		secretary	No		Yes
18	272	A	1		asst. prin.	No		No
18	272			1	ofc.wrkr.	No		No
18	272		1		secretary	No		No
18	272	A		1	secretary	No		No
18	272			1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
18	272	A	1		teacher	No		No
19	346			1	secretary	No		No
20	160	A		1	principal	Yes		No
20	160	A	1		secretary	No		No

SUMMARY OF TEST VISITS BY DISTRICT AND SCHOOL								
CSD	SCHOOL	ADDRESS REQUESTED	RACE: B/L	RACE: W	HIGHEST AUTHORITY MET	TOUR PROVIDED	TOUR OFFERED	GIFTED PROG. RAISED BY STAFF?
21	212		1		secretary	Yes		No
21	212			1	principal	Yes	Yes	Yes
22	217			1	sec. guard	No		No
22	217		1		sec. guard	No		No
27	207	A		1	teacher	Yes		No
28	101	A	1		ofc. wrkr.	No		No
28	101	A	1		principal	Yes		Yes
28	101	A		1	principal	Yes	Yes	Yes
28	101		1		principal	Yes		Yes
28	101			1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
28	101			1	secretary	No		No
28	101	A	1		secretary	No		No
28	144	A		1	ofc. wrkr.	No		No
28	144		1		asst. prin.	Yes		Yes
28	144	A	1		secretary	No		No

SUMMARY OF TEST VISITS BY DISTRICT AND SCHOOL								
CSD	SCHOOL	ADDRESS REQUESTED	RACE: B/L	RACE: W	HIGHEST AUTHORITY MET	TOUR PROVIDED	TOUR OFFERED	GIFTED PROG. RAISED BY STAFF?
28	144		1		school aide	No		No
28	144			1	principal	No		No
28	144	A		1	principal	Yes		No
28	196	A	1		asst. prin.	No		No
28	196	A		1	ofc. wrkr.	No		Yes
28	196		1		secretary	No		No
28	196		1		school aide	No		No
28	196	A		1	ofc. wrkr.	No	Yes	No
28	196	A	1		ofc. aide	No		Yes

Tester Materials

The materials used by testers for their school visits follow.

NY ACORN SCHOOLS OFFICE
845 Flatbush Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11226
(718) 693-6700 X231

INSTRUCTIONS FOR TESTERS

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

These instructions are designed to help you conduct a thorough and unbiased test and to enable you and your fellow testers to record information in a usable form. They should be reviewed before you go out on any test. You should also review the attached Report Form prior to the test.

It is very important that you not share information with your fellow testers, because you may inadvertently influence his or her report. Please do not discuss the testing with friends, family, or co-workers (except as necessary to receive messages). It is also very important that you carry through with all tests whether or not is seems productive to you at the time. As discussed in detail below, thorough notest are imperative, and you should date and sign everything you write.

ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS

1. Keep a notebook with you. It is logical for parents looking at a potential school for their child to take notest on what they see and what they are told. Also bring a form of ID that has your name on it (library card, credit or bank card, etc.) but does not have your address. You may be asked to sign in.
2. Do NOT take the Report Form into the school.
3. Before entering the test site, note the time you enter the premises and put it on your Report Form later.
4. As you conduct the test and speak with various school staff, ask for their names and write them down discreetly.
5. Be observant of the staff you talk to at the school, as they may not give you their name. Note their approximate age, color or ethnicity, build, and size. In addition, identify physical characteristics such as beard, mustache, glasses, type of attire, an accent, if any. Write up the description as soon as the test is over.

SEEING OR GETTING INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL AND REGISTRATION

1. If you state or are asked what you need, indicate the information provided on profile. Ask to talk to the Principal about the school. Indicate you would be

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interested in seeing some classrooms. You may not be able to write in your notes immediately, but look to remember how long it took to get their attention, what they responded to your request, what type of attitude they presented in answering your questions, how long they made you wait. Your goal is to try to speak to the Principal or somebody in authority like an Assistant Principal.

2. When you get to your final authority, ask them to describe their school. How many Kindergartens do they have? How many children are in each classroom? Are all the classes the same? Is there a particular way the students are taught? What do kids do in Kindergarten?
3. The authority may ask you some questions about yourself or your child. Be prepared and read your assigned information before entering the site.
   The authority may ask some subtle questions about your child like: Do they read? Do they know their letters? Do they know their numbers? Do they know their colors? Remember to note what they asked and what you responded.
4. Ask if it would be possible to take a quick look at the school espcially some Kindergarten classrooms. What was their response? What did they show you?
5. If you are shown classrooms, remember to note the following: the number of classrooms; the grade of each classroom; the approximate number of students in the class; racial or ethnic composition of class if you know, don't guess; whether you were given any indication of the children's abilities.
6. After you finish your tour or at the end of the interview with the authority ask what you will need to do to register your child. Make sure you ask when registration will occur (date and time) and what documents you will need. If you are told the school has a "gifted" program, ask how one would apply. Note if they refer you to another school for a "gifted" program.
7. Ask if the school has any materials on its programs.

NOTES

1. Be sure and keep all notes that you have taken and date them. Also make sure you identify the school on the notes.
2. Do not throw your notes away. They should be returned to the ACORN Schools Office along with your report and narrative.

AFTER THE TEST

1. When your testing is finished, please report to your Coordinator by phone immediately.

2. When you have returned to your home, office, etc., fill out the printed Report Form at once. You have a lot to remember and the sooner you write it down, the less chance you will have of forgetting anything. If situations occurred that are not covered in the form jot them down on the extra sheets so that you don't forget to include the information in your narrative. Since you may be testing at more than one location, on a given day, making additional notes immediately after each visit is important, so you don't forget what happened at which place.

PREPARING THE NARRATIVE REPORT

1. You will also be writing a narrative of what happened. Your narrative should be a comprehensive report. It should include exactly what happened during the test, in a step by step fashion. Remember to describe attitudes based on observable details (ie., hostile tone, welcoming, abrupt, friendly, indifferent, professional, etc.)
2. The narrative can be typed or hand-written, so long as your handwriting is legible. If possible, use black pen, do not use pencils or markers. If additional pages are needed use white lined paper and number all pages.
3. When you narrative is finished, sign and date it. Attach any information they may have given you about the school or process and date them as well.
4. Follow process for returning your report form, notes, narrative and any other attachments to your Coordinator.

NY ACORN Schools Office
845 Flatbush Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11226
718-693-6700 X 231

White_____Black_____Latin_____
Tester's Name_____
Date of Test_____
Time Entered_____

TESTER'S REPORT FORM

1. School Number and Address:

2. a) Did you call the school for an appointment? If you did--to whom did you speak?
Name, if known and/or position?

b) What did you say?

c) What did they tell you?

3. How many "gatekeepers" (school guard, secretary, school aide etc.) did you have to see before you could talk to someone in authority? Briefly describe what they looked like and their position and name, if known, what you said or asked them and what they responded to you. Include a description of their attitudes based on observable details (i.e. hostile tone, welcoming, abrupt, friendly, indifferent, professional, etc). Use an additional sheet if necessary.

4. What was the name and position of the highest authority you saw that morning?

5. What did you say was the purpose of your visit? How did they respond?

6. Were you asked any information about yourself? (Examples: Name, Address, Occupation, Place of Business, Income, etc.)
If yes, by whom were you asked this information?

If yes, list the information provided to them below:

7. Were you asked any information about your child? (Examples: Does your child know the A,B,Cs? Does he/she know their numbers/colors? Does the child attend pre-school?, etc.)
If yes, by whom were you asked this information?

If yes, list the information provided to them below?

8. Did they show you any classrooms? Did you have to ask or was it volunteered? How many? What grade levels?

9. If you were unable to see classrooms, what was the reason given?

10. Did they tell you anything about the student's abilities?

11. Approximately, how many children were in the classrooms?

12. What was the racial composition of the classrooms?

13. What did they tell you you needed to do to register your child?

14. Did they refer you any place else? If so, where and what was the reason given?

15. Did they tell you your child needed to be tested?
If so, where did they tell you to go?

COMMENTS

* GIVE A SUMMARY OF EVENTS OF TEST IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER, BEGIN FROM THE TIME YOU ENTERED THE SCHOOL. IF MORE SPACE IS NEEDED, USE THE FOLLOWING SHEET AND/OR LINES (81/2" X 11") PAPER AND ATTACH SHEETS TO REPORT. *